

THAT WHICH IS CLAIMED:

1. A method of electronically providing a shipping label to a customer that wishes to return a good that was previously purchased from a merchant, said method comprising the steps of:

initiating a return transaction upon receipt of a return service request, wherein said return service request contains shipping information, said shipping information comprising an address associated with said customer and an address associated with a consignee;

assigning a package tracking number to said return transaction;

generating said shipping label based at least in part on said shipping information and said package tracking number; and

providing said shipping label to said customer in electronic form.

2. The method of Claim 1, wherein said return transaction is initiated upon receipt of a return service request from said merchant.

3. The method of Claim 1, wherein said return transaction is initiated upon receipt of a return service request from said customer.

4. The method of Claim 1, wherein said return transaction is initiated upon receipt of a return service request from a vendor that supplied the merchant with said good to be returned.

5. The method of Claim 1, wherein said consignee is said merchant.

6. The method of Claim 1, wherein said consignee is a vendor that supplied the merchant with said good to be returned.

7. The method of Claim 1, wherein the step of providing said shipping label to said customer in electronic form, comprises providing said customer with an electronic image of said generated shipping label.

8. The method of Claim 1, wherein the step of providing said shipping label to said customer in electronic form, comprises providing said customer with an electronic image of said shipping label formatted as a graphics interchange format file.

9. The method of Claim 1, wherein the step of providing said shipping label to said customer in electronic form, comprises providing said customer with an electronic image of said shipping label formatted as a eltron programming language file.

10. The method of Claim 1, wherein the step of providing said shipping label to said customer in electronic form, comprises delivering an electronic image of said shipping label to a browser associated with said customer.

11. The method of Claim 1, wherein the step of providing said shipping label to said customer in electronic form, comprises the steps of:

storing an electronic image of said shipping label, and
sending to said customer a link associated with said stored electronic image.

12. The method of Claim 11, wherein said electronic image of said shipping label is stored on a carrier server.

13. The method of Claim 11, wherein said electronic image of said shipping label is stored on a merchant server.

14. The method of Claim 1, wherein said return service request is formatted as an extensible markup language file.

15. The method of Claim 1, further comprising the step of updating a package tracking database with said package tracking number assigned to said return transaction.

16. The method of Claim 1, further comprising the step of generating a return service response in response to the return service request, said return service response including a transaction reference identifier and a response status code.

17. A method of electronically providing a shipping label to a customer to return a good that was previously purchased from a merchant, said method comprising the steps of:

initiating a return transaction upon receipt of a return service request;
generating said shipping label based at least in part on said return service request;
formatting a label delivery link that is associated with said shipping label and includes a hypertext link to a uniform resource locator address;
providing said customer with said label delivery link; and
delivering said shipping label to a browser associated with said customer upon activation of said label delivery link.

18. The method of Claim 17, wherein said return transaction is initiated upon receipt of a return service request from said merchant.

19. The method of Claim 17, wherein said return transaction is initiated upon receipt of a return service request from said customer.

20. The method of Claim 17, wherein said return transaction is initiated upon receipt of a return service request from a vendor that supplied the merchant with said good to be returned.

21. The method of Claim 17, wherein said uniform resource locator of said label delivery link corresponds to a label generation application.

22. The method of Claim 17, wherein said uniform resource locator of said label delivery link corresponds to a label generation servlet.

23. The method of Claim 17, wherein said uniform resource locator of said label delivery link corresponds to a Java application.

24. The method of Claim 17, wherein said label delivery link includes at least one of a package tracking number, a locality string, a merchant registration identification and a shipping label creation date.

25. The method of Claim 17, wherein at least part of said label delivery link is encrypted.

26. The method of Claim 17, wherein at least part of said label delivery link is encrypted using triple data encryption standard techniques.

27. The method of Claim 17, wherein at least part of said label delivery link is encoded.

28. The method of Claim 17, wherein at least part of said label delivery link is encrypted and encoded.

29. The method of Claim 17, wherein the step of providing said customer with a label delivery link comprises sending said label delivery link to said customer via electronic mail.

30. A method of electronically providing a shipping label to a customer to return a good that was previously purchased from a merchant, said method comprising the steps of:

initiating a return transaction upon receipt of a return service request;

generating said shipping label based at least in part on said return service request;

formatting a label delivery link that is associated with said shipping label and includes a hypertext link to a uniform resource locator address;

providing said merchant with said label delivery link; and

delivering said shipping label to a browser associated with said customer upon activation of said label delivery link.

31. A method of processing a return request from a customer that wishes to return a good that was previously purchased from a merchant, said method comprising the steps of:

initiating a return transaction upon receipt of a return service request;
generating a shipping label based at least in part on said return service request;
printing said shipping label at a carrier facility;
taking said printed shipping label from said carrier facility to said customer;
affixing said shipping label to a package containing said good to be returned; and
delivering said package to said merchant.

32. The method of Claim 31, further comprising the steps of:
assigning a package tracking number to said return transaction, and
including said package tracking number on said shipping label.

33. The method of Claim 31, wherein the step of printing said shipping label at a carrier facility, comprises the steps of:

determining which carrier facility has responsibility for package pick ups and deliveries at a location of said customer; and
sending said shipping label to a printer at said responsible carrier facility.

34. An electronic return shipping system, comprising:

a merchant application residing on a merchant computer, said merchant application configured to generate a return service request in response to a request from a customer to return a good previously purchased from a merchant;

an online return application in electronic communication with said merchant application; said online return application configured to receive said return service request and generate a shipping label based at least in part on said return service request; and

wherein said online return application is further configured to electronically deliver said shipping label to said customer.

35. The system of Claim 34, wherein said merchant application and said online return application are configured to communicate electronically over a network.

36. The system of Claim 34, wherein said merchant application is configured to send said return service request to said online return application over the Internet.

37. The system of Claim 34, wherein said merchant application is configured to send said return service request to said online return application over the World Wide Web.

44. The system of Claim 34, wherein said online application is configured to assign a package tracking number to said return service request, and include said package tracking number on said shipping label.

45. The system of Claim 34, wherein said online return application is configured to store an electronic image of said shipping label, and send to said customer a link associated with said stored electronic image.

46. The system of Claim 34, wherein said online return application is configured to store an electronic image of said shipping label, and send to said merchant a link associated with said stored electronic image.

47. The system of Claim 34, wherein said merchant application is configured to store an electronic image of said shipping label received from said online return application, and send to said customer a link associated with said stored electronic image.

48. The system of Claim 34, wherein said online application is further configured to generate a return service response in response to said return service request, said return service response including a transaction reference identifier and a response status code.

49. An electronic return shipping system, comprising:

a merchant application residing on a merchant computer, said merchant application configured to generate a return service request in response to a request from a customer to return a good previously purchased from a merchant;

an online return application in electronic communication with said merchant application; said online return application configured to receive said return service request and generate a shipping label based at least in part on said return service request; and

wherein said online return application is further configured to format and send a label delivery link that is associated with said shipping label and includes a hypertext link to a uniform locator address.

50. The system of Claim 49, wherein said merchant application is configured to generate said return service request as an extensible markup language document.

51. The system of Claim 49, wherein said online application is configured to obtain a package tracking number for said return service request and include said package tracking number on said shipping label.

52. The system of Claim 49, wherein said online return application is configured to send said label delivery link to said merchant via electronic mail.

53. The system of Claim 49, wherein said online return application is configured to send said label delivery link to said customer via electronic mail.

54. The system of Claim 49, wherein said uniform resource locator of said label delivery link corresponds to a label generation application, said label generation application configured to deliver said shipping label to a browser associated with said customer upon activation of said label delivery link.

55. The system of Claim 54, wherein said label generation application is a Java application.

56. The system of Claim 49, wherein said label delivery link includes at least one of a package tracking number, a locality string, a merchant registration identification and a shipping label creation date.

57. The system of Claim 49, wherein said online return application is configured to encrypt at least a portion of said label delivery link.

58. The system of Claim 49, wherein said online return application is configured to encode at least a portion of said label delivery link.

59. The system of Claim 49, wherein said online return application is configured to generate an electronic return notification.

60. The system of Claim 59, wherein said electronic return notification comprises a human-readable portion and a machine-readable portion.

61. The system of Claim 60, wherein said online return application is configured to send said electronic return notification to said merchant via an electronic mail.

62. The system of Claim 60, wherein said online return application is configured to send said electronic return notification to a vendor that supplied the merchant with said good to be returned via electronic mail.

63. The system of Claim 62, wherein said online return application is configured to add a vendor email address and a bounce email address to said electronic mail, and wherein said online return application is further configured to forward said electronic mail to said bounce email address upon receipt of a notification that said electronic mail could not be delivered to said vendor email address.

64. The system of Claim 63, wherein said bounce email address is an address associated with said merchant.